

A SURPRISE IN THE GLOAMING:
A FIELD OBSERVATION AT SPLINTER HILL BOG PRESERVE, ALABAMA

DAMON COLLINGSWORTH • California Carnivores • 2833 Old Gravenstein Hwy • Sebastopol, CA
95472 • USA • Califcarn@aol.com

This fall, I had the great pleasure of taking a carnivorous plant tour of Georgia, Florida, and Alabama with Mike Wang. It was a lifetime dream fulfilled, full of amazing plants and treasured memories.

We arrived at Splinter Hill Bog Preserve near Rabun, Alabama late in the day, having been distracted along the way by many smaller roadside sites. We pulled into the parking lot and as we did, our mouths dropped as our hearts rejoiced in unison. There before us were perfectly managed fields of big healthy *Sarracenia leucophylla* at their peak of growth. Spectacular!

The sun was just setting as we leapt from the car to walk through them and hurried to take as many photos as we could while the light held. Soon, it was too dark for photography and I even put my camera away in the car, but I couldn't bring myself to leave yet. It was an amazing moment in my life to be there standing in a sort of carnivore Shangri-La, surrounded by plants that I have loved so much for as long as I can remember (see Back Cover). I never wanted to leave.

We stayed well after sunset and as I walked the paths lined with lacey white pitchers, a creature buzzed past my head. I tried to make out in the darkness what it was, but it was quick and dusky colored, so I strained to find it again. As my eyes raced from pitcher to pitcher in hot pursuit, I quickly noticed two things: that they were everywhere and they were hummingbird or sphinx moths! There were hundreds of them buzzing like little brown fairies from pitcher to pitcher. They beat their wings very rapidly and so they fly less like a moth and more like a hummingbird, hence the name. It is this ability that allows them to hover in front of the pitcher mouth and rob the sweet nectar without paying the ultimate price paid by other visitors. I quickly retrieved my camera and half due to my persistence and half to their abundance I was able to shoot several photos of them (see Fig. 1). They were very charismatic so I chased them in the dark for about an hour, my flash occasionally shattering the dark and mimicking the thunderstorms in the distance. At one point, I was lucky enough to catch one in a moment's rest atop a pitcher lid, which allowed for close inspection and some amazing photos.

They seemed to suffer no ill effect from the nectar as they were all quite aware of my presence. Each one would only partially accept my pursuit for a few pitcher visits before flying far away to another thick patch to eat unbothered. Their very long tongues allow them to avoid the pitcher mouth almost entirely and they are mostly too big to be caught. Casual inspection of the pitcher found no captured moths, so there is no obvious benefit to the plants, but who knows what tiny contribution they might make.

I have since looked up the moth and believe it to be *Enyo lugubris*, the mournful sphinx. This moth is very widespread and ranges all the way from northern Argentina and Uruguay north through Central America, the West Indies, and Mexico to Arizona; east to Florida and north to South Carolina. Adults can be seen in flight year-round in its tropical range including Southern Florida and Louisiana. North of that, adults only fly from August-November. Due to the large numbers all partaking in the same activity and their apparent immunity to the drugging effects of the nectar, I believe that this may represent a significant part of the adults' diet in this area. I wonder even if the flight of adults is timed with the peak pitcher production for *S. leucophylla* in areas where their ranges overlap. It would take much more observation to verify this and unfortunately I live over 2000 miles away, but I would encourage other local enthusiasts to pick up on this initial observation and see if this is a yearly event or just a one night chance sighting.

Bob Hanrahan's ranch is only about 45 minutes from Splinter Hill and he said that he had never seen these moths, but they would be easy to miss in the autumnal evening light.

I love the way these plants have evolved and how over the millennia they have created a micro-cosm of tiny creatures interacting within a complex ecology. It has been my pleasure to share this tiny portion of that world with you.



Figure 1: Hummingbird moths feeding on *Sarracenia leucophylla* at the Splinter Hill Bog Preserve near Rabun, Alabama after sunset.

THE ICPS SEED BANK

an exclusive member benefit

The International Carnivorous Plant Society offers its members exclusive access to a variety of carnivorous plant seeds. Seeds are ordered online at the ICPS Store:

<http://icps.clubexpress.com/>

The Seed Bank cannot exist without seed donations. Information about growing carnivorous plants from seed and donating seeds to the Seed Bank are at the ICPS public web site:

<http://www.carnivorousplants.org/seedbank>

If you do not have access to the Internet, please send seed order form requests to:

International Carnivorous Plant Society
1564-A Fitzgerald Drive, PMB 322
Pinole, CA 94564-2229

JOHN BRITTNACHER, Seed Bank Manager, john@carnivorousplants.org